Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Hood

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Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Hood

by lurkinglurkerwholurks

Summary

It was somewhere in the middle of his five-on-one back alley brawl that Tim admitted that maybe he had made a mistake.

——Can be read as a standalone——

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

It was somewhere in the middle of his five-on-one back alley brawl that Tim admitted that maybe he had made a mistake. Not the fight itself—he could take five low-level crooks, no problem. It's not like they were ninja assassins or Rogues or Rogues working with ninja assassins or anything. And really, if you looked at it right, what had really happened was he had made some teeny, tiny, pretty much inconsequential decisions that in their own way amassed to equal to one single mistake. So it wasn't his fault, really.

Like, yes, technically, he had chosen to go out even though he didn't feel tip-top 100% well. It's not like he had been dying or anything. Been there, done that, knew the feeling. It was just an earache, the lingering remnants of a mild cold that he had managed to keep hidden. Just an earache and a sore throat. *Bruce* had gone out in way worse condition so many times, so Tim felt justified by comparison to make his own call. And he hadn't felt so bad when he'd first put on the suit.

And should he have been patrolling with someone? Maybe. But it just hadn't panned out. That wasn't his fault. Bruce had Damian tonight, and as much as Tim knew Bruce wanted them to learn how to patrol together as a team, Tim just wasn't feeling it this time. See: Aforementioned illness. Usually, when Bruce had Damian, Tim stuck around Dick, but he'd suggested Cass go with Dick this time, just the two of them. He knew Dick wanted to get to know their sister better, and Tim patrolled with Cass more often *and* lived with her at the Manor, so stepping back so they could have some quality time seemed like the thing to do. And honestly? Tim missed his own personal quality time.

It had been ages since Tim had patrolled alone. He never wanted to go back to those horrible months before, when Bruce had been lost in time and everyone except Tim had assumed him dead. That kind of alone had been almost unbearable. The isolation had felt like icicles plunged into his marrow, numbing and excruciating all at once. But secretly, to himself, Tim could admit that he missed the quiet nights, just his thoughts and the dull roar of Gotham traffic, and being able to plan his own route, make his own decisions, guide his own way. So when the opportunity presented itself to pair Cass with Dick and volunteer for a solo patrol, Tim had leapt at it.

But now here he was, alone, no backup, with a pain in his ear that had progressed rapidly from too-tight-earplug to digging-with-a-sharpened pencil and an alleyway full of idiots who refused to just buzz off. The

adrenaline helped some, pushing the pain to the back of his awareness and adding some clarity to his focus, but as the fight dragged on, the benefits faded. Tim wasn't an idiot, so he did try to be careful of headshots with his bo, but he was losing patience and equilibrium in equal measure. He took no pride in the cheap shot that felled his final opponent, but he wasn't sorry either.

Tim let out a soft sigh of relief as he reached out and rested his hand on the brick wall that definitely wasn't moving. If he could just stand here for a minute or two, the world would settle, and then maybe he could finish his route. GCPD could come pick up the would-be gangsters scattered around the alley, and he could give a statement later. Maybe tomorrow, after he'd removed his own ear and replaced it with a prosthetic that didn't hurt. Wayne E. had to have something that would do the trick.

"Slip your babysitter?"

Tim whirled, bo at the ready, and flailed to regain his balance. Red Hood stood beneath a nearby fire escape, arms crossed, the expressionless helmet somehow still managing to give the impression of being flatly unimpressed.

"Hood."

It was maybe—definitely—stupid of Tim to feel relief at the sight of Jason Todd. Jason had tried to kill him more than once, had made it clear in no uncertain terms that he hated Batman, the Waynes, and everything to do with his old life. Except Tim hadn't been scared of Jason Todd in months. Wary of him, sure. Cognizant of just how dangerous he was, absolutely. But Jason had had too many chances to kill Tim at his lowest and hadn't taken them. Tim had his own blanket at Jason's safehouse, even. He didn't think Jason *knew* that was Tim's blanket now, but *Tim* knew he had claimed it as his own, and that's what counted.

"Fancy meeting you here," Tim bluffed, tone light and breezy, or he tried to make it be. He kept having to clear his throat. He gestured to the groaning men at his feet. "Not yours, I hope?"

Not that it would have mattered if they were—Tim was sure they weren't—but he needed the sweeping movement of his hand to draw attention away from the reflexive wince he gave as pain carved into his ear again. Tim's shoulders had relaxed as he retracted his bo and slotted it back into his belt, but then he squinted and noticed Hood's

inquisitive head tilt, and the skin between his shoulder blades prickled. It gave Hood a distinctly cat-like look, and that made Tim the mouse.

“You out patrolling by yourself?” Hood asked, the modulator in the helmet adding an extra layer of menace to the question.

Tim’s brain was scrambling even as he covered with a smirk. Had he done something to piss Jason off? No, he couldn’t have. None of his cases had anything to do with Hood or his territory or anything even tangentially related to Jason. These weren’t Hood’s guys either, so what was the problem?

“The others are around,” Tim replied, his tone still unbothered.

Able to be here in time if Jason tried to start something, was the implication, but Jason was still watching him closely. Tim actually wasn’t sure where everyone was right now. He’d popped out the earpiece earlier in the night, unable to stand the feel of it in his aching ear, but the other ear sounded strange and muffled. The attention needed to decipher the night’s chatter was too distracting, so he’d gone without.

Wow, he did not feel good. The adrenaline was really coming down now, and the pain from his ear seemed to double in intensity in between breaths. The world still felt like it was shifting, too, like he was standing on a boat instead of the cracked-concrete bedrock of Gotham. Tim flexed his jaw subtly, trying to relieve the pressure from one side of his head. He needed Jason to get to whatever point he was building up to—ask his favor, make his threat, whatever—so Tim could drag himself home and pop half a bottle of painkillers.

“B know you’re out?” Hood asked instead, and oh boy, Jason bringing up Bruce voluntarily was a bad sign.

“Of course,” Tim huffed. “Why wouldn’t he?”

Hood shifted his weight slightly, and Tim mimicked the movement. Hood was built like a mountain, but he was fast, and Tim would need a head start if he wanted to stay out of reach. It was only when he did it that Tim felt the movement itself and translated what it might mean coming from his own body. Was Hood… uncomfortable?

This was weird. Tim wasn’t sure he could handle weird right now. He flexed his jaw again, trying to yawn without opening his mouth to see if the change in pressure would pop open whatever was going on—oh,

Hood was talking again. He'd tuned out by accident and missed whatever it was, and now Jason looked annoyed. Maybe that was just the faceplate, but Jason usually seemed annoyed when he was talking to Tim, so Tim had picked up a sort of sixth sense for that kind of thing.

Hood hesitated, then looked either way down the alley, clearly checking to make sure they wouldn't be overheard. Oh, here it comes. Jason sidled closer, hands clearly visible, weapons holstered, which meant nothing, except now he was leaning in and Tim found himself leaning forward as well. Whatever this was, it had to be important, it had to be big, it—

Tim was on the ground, screaming, hands clamped to the ear Jason had slapped as fast as a striking snake. His brain had exploded, Jason had exploded his brain, his ear had to be a pulpy mess, he was dying, he was deaf, he—

Gloved hands gripped his arms, pulling his hands away to uncover the ear, then hauled him bodily over a broad shoulder with what felt like the rise and fall of a heavy sigh. Tim tried to find enough purchase to rip himself free, but ended up clinging to Jason, fingers tangled in the back of his jacket like a trembling kitten.

He had to think. Hood was kidnapping him, clearly, but why? And why now? Hood didn't seem like the type to go for ransom, though it would make sense now that Bruce was back to pay it. Maybe it was about revenge, payback, more likely against Bruce or Dick than Tim. Unless Jason had just been biding his time before. Was this a mask thing or a personal thing or both? Holy *shit* that hurt.

Tim had stopped screaming and even managed to choke back his whimpers—a necessity, since dangling down Jason's back, a shoulder digging into his stomach, peaked the nausea that had been burbling in the back of his throat. Jason jostled him slightly, making Tim freeze and hold his breath while he prayed for the nausea to pass. The last thing he needed was to piss Hood off further by spewing down his back.

The journey was a short one, or seemed it between Tim's narrow focus and Jason's long legs eating up the distance. He probably should have salvaged some of his pride and tried to fight his way free, but that seemed like a fantastic way to lose a limb or three. Best to wait to see what Hood's master plan was and sabotage it then, right? That was what Tim told himself, at least, and his caution seemed borne out

when Hood hauled him through the streets, into a building, and up the stairs.

It wasn't until he redistributed Tim's weight to unlock the door that Tim realized where they were. In his defense, he'd never actually seen the larger interior of Jason's building. He had always come through the window into the apartment itself. But now they were through the door and Tim knew that threadbare carpet, so worn and stained from decades of use that it was no longer an identifiable color, and he recognized the subtle whiff of lavender from the nearby plugin. Why had Jason kidnapped him to his safehouse? Had he added a dissection lab since Tim had been here last? A torture chamber? If Jason tried to take him into the bathroom, Tim would do… Well, he didn't know what, but he'd do something.

Tim landed on the couch with a grunt and rolled into a defensive posture, one hand cupped protectively over the still-throbbing ear. A finger jabbed him in the leg. Tim twitched, then realized Jason was asking him something.

"No," he managed to grit out, "it's Robin's turn."

Damian's week at the Manor, which meant it was Tim's week to stay away. Sometimes Tim visited Bludhaven and stayed with Dick, but this time he stuck to his own apartment. Why did Hood need to know that?

Oh, answering had been risky, puke-wise. Tim closed his eyes, pressed his lips together tightly, and tried to stay very still.

A shadow blocked the overhead light, so he cracked open one eye, only to flinch back into the cushion at the sight of Jason, helmet now in hand, frowning down at him. Something must have shown on Tim's face, because Jason disappeared from view, then quickly reappeared with a small waste basket.

"Don't barf on my couch," he growled, shoving the can into Tim's chest.

Tim blinked. "What the f—"

"Language," Jason interrupted with a spiteful sliver of a smile. Rude, since Tim was pretty sure Jason was the reason the rule existed at all, but he sounded much more likely to take a knife to Tim's mouth for it. "So who am I calling?"

“Who are you calling?” Tim echoed, the trashcan clutched to his chest like a stuffed animal. “What—” *Oop*—

Jason waited, standing patiently next to the couch, then took the bag full of Alfred’s chicken kiev to the hall, the ties pinched gingerly between two fingers. He returned with a fresh plastic bag and relined the can.

“Who am I calling?” he asked again, tone as flat and unimpressed as it had been with the voice modulator. “Bruce? Alfred? Who’s picking you up?”

“Picking up my body parts?” Tim asked. Ugh. Even to his own ears, he sounded gross, the vomiting having torn up his sore throat into a croaky rasp.

Jason looked like he wanted to slap Tim’s ear again. He bent down and enunciated like Tim was a very old man. “Who am I calling to take you back to the Manor?”

Oh. What?

Tim at least had the sense not to jostle his head with a shake. “It’s not my week. I’m at my place.”

“Not like this you’re not.”

“Why am I here? I mean,” Tim hurried to add, before he could make the situation worse, “this is one of the weirder kidnappings I’ve been a part of, no offense.”

Jason looked like he had taken full offense. His lips had twisted and pursed like Tim had said something inconceivably dumb. “I said your name like twice in that alley. And I wasn’t quiet coming down the fire escape either.”

And Tim hadn’t heard him until he was within knifing distance. Right.

“Then what the h—elsterskelter was with the…?” Tim gestured at his ear, the one Jason had struck.

There was a brief flash of amusement at Tim’s clumsy cover, but it lapsed back into irritation quickly enough. “Didn’t feel like playing ten rounds of ‘Catch the Baby Bird.’”

Baby? Tim was trying to decide how offended *he* should feel when

Jason leaned in again. There was a quick exchange of slaps as Jason reached for Tim's head, was batted away, and then smacked Tim in the back of the head for the affront before gripping his skull and forcing his head sideways.

Tim, out of an abundance of self-preservation, went still, a mouse caught in the cat's jaws. But all Jason did was angle his head slightly, one way, then the other, poke at a sore spot just behind Tim's jaw, then hum when Tim flinched, before letting go and backing away.

"You've got the balance of a drunk duck," Jason announced as he turned his back on Tim entirely. "Nausea. Went down like a lightweight when I hit you, too. Lemme guess, your ear hurts, you can't hear all that well, and you get dizzy when you change orientation too quickly."

"I'm—"

"If the next words out of your mouth are some stupid dating joke, I will duct tape you to the couch and this *will* turn into a hostage situation," Jason warned, voice deep but loud enough to carry from the kitchen. "Answer the question."

Deflection, Tim noted to himself, was not going to get him very far tonight. "Yes."

"To which?"

"All of it." Kind of eerie, actually. How long had Hood been watching him?

"You getting over a cold or something?"

How long had Hood been watching him?

"... Maybe."

There was the rattle of a fridge door opening and closing and jars being popped open on the counter.

"Is this a spleen thing?" Jason asked over the noise.

"What?!"

Tim's headache was getting worse. What was happening. What had happened to his night. Vomiting had helped a little but not enough. Still clutching the trashcan, he wiggled down into the couch cushions

and tried to think still, non-queasy thoughts.

“Is. This. A. Spleen. Thing.” Jason had raised his voice, as if volume were the issue. There was the bang and beeps of a microwave door.

“Not everything is a *spleen thing*,” Tim grumbled into the back of the couch.

He was suddenly, painfully aware that the last time Jason had seen him, Tim had been passed out on the floor dying from a stupid fever brought on by said spleen, or lack thereof. Their whole weird thing while Bruce was away had been a separate matter entirely. Tim had been an absolute mess and Jason hadn’t cared enough to be bothered by it. If anything, he’d pitied Tim enough not to murder him, and Tim was grateful for that, but it did leave Tim in a deficit as far as his pride was concerned.

“Ear infections are for little kids,” Jason said, close enough to make Tim jump and crack open one eye again. “And idiots with a spleenless immune system.”

As if to punctuate his point, he thunked a rattling bottle of pills down on the coffee table within arm’s reach. A glass of water appeared next to it.

Tim squinted blearily at the label. “... Why does it have my name on it?”

“Alfred,” was Jason’s terse reply as he turned away.

“No, Tim,” Tim argued.

“No, *Alfred* knows you’re a stupid little weenie who does stuff like forget your antibiotics and pass out without a *spleen*,” Jason sneered.

The sneer would have been scary, even with the word *weenie*, except for the context. Alfred had… given backup meds to Jason. For Tim. In case Tim had ended up at Jason’s safehouse again. Where he still technically wasn’t invited to be. And Jason had taken the meds.

“Take your damn pills,” Jason ordered from the kitchen as he silenced the beeping microwave.

“Language.”

Tim flinched, halfway outstretched toward the bottle, as the spoon hit

him in the back of the head. Even plastic, it still hurt. But also, it was plastic. A good sign, he thought.

He had swallowed the correct dosage and used the rest of the water to rinse out his mouth when Jason returned from the kitchen.

“Ear drops,” Jason said by way of explanation as he placed a dropper and a dipping cup of golden liquid on the coffee table. “Three drops per ear, then tissues. Don’t make a mess.”

He turned away but kept his voice raised enough for Tim to hear, “I’m going to take a shower.”

Tim frowned, eyes on Jason’s back. “Am I… staying here?”

Jason waved him off without pausing. “I’ll set up a drop-off with Dickhead. We’re not having a slumber party.”

And Dick wasn’t allowed here, was the unspoken second half. That was all fine with Tim. He’d spent a surprising amount of time in this safehouse, but mostly when he didn’t care what happened to him while he was there. Being sick and vulnerable in the heart of Red Hood’s turf was not Tim’s idea of a good time. Still, there were hours left before Nightwing’s patrol ended, so he might as well get comfortable.

Using the dregs of water left in the glass, Tim carefully peeled away his domino and scrubbed off the residual adhesive, then wiggled out of his outer suit. That was one of the unspoken rules of the safehouse, this careful balance of neutrality. He couldn’t be Red Robin here, could barely even function as Tim Drake here. It was better, safer, to be no one at all.

Stripping down to his base layer left Tim feeling dizzy and worn out, so he wedged himself back down into the couch cushions and tried to run through some of the grounding meditations his therapist had shown him. He didn’t hear Jason return from the bathroom, just retained a vague awareness of someone passing behind the couch and into the bedroom beyond. He had meant to put in the eardrops, had meant to stay awake and keep tabs on Jason. He failed, drifting down into an exhausted, restless half-sleep that brought neither rest nor comfort.

When he woke again, the right side of his head was nothing but bright, angry, throbbing pain. It was too much all at once—the pain,

the gross dryness in his mouth, the crackling in his other ear, the unsettled sloshing of his equilibrium even as he lay still. He didn't know where he was, what was happening, who was hurting him. Tim clawed at his head, as if he could dig his fingers into the canal and scoop out the infection.

Hands caught his wrists, pulling them away, then one of the hands pinned his wrists together while the other arm slipped between the cushion and his back and dragged him upright.

"Okay," a voice was saying from the other side of the pain, "okay, you idiot, hold on. Just—" A grunt and then Tim was propped upright between the arm and a torso.

There was grumbling Tim couldn't catch, something low and irritated that rumbled through the chest to his left. Something something *ear drops* and more aspersions against Tim's intelligence. More maneuvering happened around Tim, the pinning arm's hand wrapping around more tightly to keep his wrists immobilized as the other hand went off somewhere else.

"Hurts," Tim heard himself say, his own voice muffled and far away. He hadn't realized he'd been speaking at all. "Head. Hurts."

"Yeah, kid," the chest rumbled. "I know. Hold on, I'm fixing it."

Something warm and wet dripped into his ear. Tim flinched away from it, into the chest, but then the grip around his wrists released so that a finger could rub at his ear, coaxing the liquid to drip down where it was needed. It didn't help, or didn't feel like it helped, but just the distraction eased some of his discomfort.

A cotton ball plugged his ear, then the hand turned his head, tilting it enough to quickly drip the same warm wet into the other crackly ear and then rub the heat down. Tim squirmed, but pulling away from the hand drove him into the chest. He didn't mind so much. The big-solid-muscle-warm felt… safe. It felt like hugging Bruce.

The voice had stopped grumbling, at least loud enough for him to hear. The hand was still pressing on his ear, callouses scratching the skin.

" 'm feel awful," Tim mumbled.

"I know."

The voice didn't malign his poor tired brain this time. That was nice. Poor poor brain. It wasn't his brain's fault that it hurt so much and that thinking made it hurt worse. He was always thinking, all the time. It felt nice for it to stop for a bit.

"M'ears." Tim tried to dig at the offending ear, but the hand batted him away again.

"Stop." A rattle. "I should've given you painkillers with the antibiotics. I just…" A hesitation, fraught and tense. "Doesn't matter. It's fine."

The shoulder propping Tim up shifted.

"Here."

Two pills popped into Tim's mouth, then were washed down with a cup of water held to his lips. The water hurt to swallow but felt good in his mouth. Maybe Tim should have been more suspicious of unidentified meds from nameless hands, but he really didn't care right now. His therapist would call that a red flag, but que sera sera, YOLO, and so forth.

"Head." Tim reached again, but this time for his head instead of his ear. His head felt so *full*.

"The meds will kick in soon." Another hesitation. "Actually, hold on."

The shoulder moved. It *left*. Tim could have cried, except he thought he already was. He felt miserable, and now he was alone and miserable, and that was worse. It was always, *always* worse.

"Geez, kid, you're a mess," the voice said, but it wasn't unkind. The hands were back again, pushing him up, and then the shoulder. Yay, the shoulder. And then there was a heavy cloth, hot and amazing, pressed against Tim's ear, and the relief pulled a sob from his sore and croaky throat.

"Good stuff, huh?" There was more shifting, but instead of leaving again, the shoulder-chest-voice leaned back into the couch, settling in next to Tim. "I know. I had a lot of ear infections as a kid. Crappy immune system, I guess. My mom…"

A low hum, thoughtful and deep, vibrated through the chest and into Tim's cheek. It was like curling up against a tiger. The best.

"We didn't have a lot of money, you know? Not a lot of money for

antibiotics and stuff." A thumb swiped at Tim's face, absently clearing away the sticky, half-dried tears. "She tried. Got 'em when we could. Mostly, it was garlic ear drops and hot compresses. It always helped, and having her sit with me."

Tim's ear hurt less. It wasn't better, wasn't fixed, but the pain was easing, beaten back by the compress, the oil, the company. He was awake enough now to remember where he was and who he was with.

He was using the Red Hood, murderer and president of the Anti-Tim Fan Club, as a body pillow.

Jason Todd was cleaning the tears from his face and massaging his infected ear.

Robin was telling him about his mom.

Tim wanted to hear more. He wanted to hear what Jason remembered about his mom. Bruce hadn't liked to talk about Jason in general, much less his life before the Manor. Tim had picked up pieces here and there, but so much was a blank. Did Jason miss her? Had he been sad when she died? Whatever their relationship had been, she didn't sound like Tim's mother. Jason's mom had stayed with him. And he had loved her.

Tim didn't dare ask about any of it. They weren't—that is, Jason didn't—well. There was a reason Tim was hearing this now, while he was sick and half-conscious and presumed to be so out of it that it would be like it never happened.

But maybe that was okay. Maybe this could be enough, for now. Tim had found his way back to the Manor against all odds. It was okay if Jason took a little longer, as long as he returned eventually. And Jason didn't need to know he was awake. Tim would remember.

Eyes still closed, Tim yawned and shifted, risking letting himself relax fully again, exhaustion tugging at his hem.

Jason yawned as well, chest rising with a stutter and then settling under Tim's cheek.

"Stupid Dick and his stupid long patrols. I'm not putting my boots back on tonight. He can wait until morning," Jason muttered and tugged at the blanket Tim hadn't noticed before, untangling it from around Tim so it draped over them both.

Tim hummed his agreement. Yes. Yes, morning would work. He tugged the blanket up to his chin, thumb rubbing in fits against the familiar stitching at the hem. Another yawn stretched his jaw until it cracked, but Jason's hand kept the compress in place, the weight of his arm warm and comforting.

"Thank you," Tim murmured.

There was no reply, but the thumb against his face twitched, the briefest acknowledgement.

They slept.

End Notes

As always, I hate endings. I also hate titles. Writing is HARD.

This fic references events in The Return (https://archiveofourown.org/works/23726839/chapters/56977363) and can be considered the spiritual successor to Fix This (https://archiveofourown.org/works/34973626).

I have a part two I want to write, but it's going to be... tricky. So this is marked as complete for now, because who the heck knows.

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